PIJSSL

Praxis International Journal of Social Science and Literature

A Peer-reviewed Multidisciplinary e-Journal with SJIR 2025 = 6.034 & ISSN: 2581-6675

Vol. 09, No. 06 (June 2026) **DOI:** 10.51879/PIJSSL/090615

Email: editor.pijssl@gmail.com | **Website:** www.pijssl.com

OPEN ACCESS

Reading Frantz Fanon's 'Black Skin, White Masks' through Quentin Skinner

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Abstract

Regarded as a classic reading of postcolonial theory of International Relations, 'Black Skin, White Masks' of Frantz Fanon explores the intersectionality of the effects of colonialism on race and identity. Although read extensively through the postcolonial lens, this paper aims to reread and reinterpret Fanon's Black Skin, White Masks through a different methodological lens provided by Quentin Skinner. The purpose is to understand Fanon's work through the contextualist approach of Skinner in order to appreciate the intellectual and historical context in which Fanon produced this work. The attempt is to move beyond the understanding of Fanon's work as a mere description of colonial experience but as a political act of resistance to challenge the system of racial hierarchy and colonial dominance. Utilising Skinner's method to focus on the intentions of the author and the linguistic context of political works, the paper highlights the way Fanon deals with specific conditions of French colonialism, assimilation and discrimination against a particular race. The paper situates Fanon in the postcolonial thought of International Relations and underlines the need to contextualise seminal work in the historical circumstances of their production and recover original political significance. Through Skinner, this paper showcases the need to utilise new methods to gain important insights into Fanon's critique of colonial dominance and racial discrimination.

Keywords: *Frantz Fanon, Quentin Skinner, Black Skin, White Masks, Intellectual History, Postcolonial Thought.*

Introduction

Black Skin, White Masks, authored by Frantz Fanon, is regarded as a classic across various disciplines, and rightfully so. This seminal work delves into the complexities of racism, unraveling its psychological, cultural, and existential dimensions. Offering a critique of the effects of colonialism on both the white colonizer and the black colonized, Fanon makes his work an essential reading of postcolonial studies and psychoanalysis. To decode the intricacies of the complexities of Fanon's work 'Black Skin, White Masks', this paper uses *Quentin Skinner's method* of textual interpretation. This is because Skinner's method allows one to take a peek into the illocutionary force of Fanon's work, that is, what Fanon was aiming to do with his work, as well as locate it within the historical and intellectual context. As mentioned in the introduction of the book itself, Fanon's book aims to showcase the psychological constructs of a black person and analyze the effects of colonialism. Following Skinner's argument that political texts must be understood within the historical and linguistic contexts in which they were produced, this paper reads Black Skin, White Masks as a historically situated intervention into the realities of colonialism, race, and identity in the French colonial world (Skinner,

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1969). By employing Skinner's method, therefore, this paper attempts to understand the text in its entirety and gain a comprehensive view of the same.

Historical and Intellectual Context of Fanon's 'Black Skin, White Masks'

Born in Martinique, a Caribbean island under French colonial rule, Frantz Fanon emerged as a revolutionary writer whose works explored decolonization, black identity, and the psychological effects of colonialism. In 1952, he published his first work, 'Black Skin White Masks', a seminal work that is still widely read more than half a century later. In 1961, he published another work, 'The Wretched of the Earth'. It is not only the wide readership of Fanon's work that makes it a classic but also the complexities and various themes he captures through it.

Fanon writes in his introductory note of the book that to know and understand what racism is, it is important first to understand 'what is a man?' and 'what is a black man'. Here, he points out that a man is always attributed with the qualities of a white male, a superior race, the one who is a colonizer. In contrast, the understanding of a black man is stereotyped to immediately think of being a native, a colored person, one who is of an inferior race and is colonized. It is not possible to understand the idea of a man and a black man without engaging with their identities, both of whom are confined by their constructs of racial selfhood. They are 'trapped' in their identities.

In the opening chapter, Fanon introduces the reader to the Antilleans, inhabitants of Caribbean islands, who sought to "whiten" themselves by adopting the culture and language of their colonizers after traveling to France. Upon returning home, they are treated as superiors. Fanon highlights that their efforts to whiten themselves are unnecessary, as their own culture is inherently rich and valuable. Here, the *intention* of Fanon is visible again. Fanon criticizes the efforts of colonized individuals to assimilate into the culture of white colonizers. As another instance, Fanon also highlights the use of pidgin, a hybrid language employed by colonizers to communicate with the colonized, reinforcing the latter's perceived inferiority. He questions the necessity of seeking validation from colonizers, emphasizing how such linguistic practices serve as a constant reminder of the colonized people's subordinate status.

Fanon draws together the *existential experience of racialized subjectivity* and the calculative logic of colonial rule. For Fanon, and this is critically important, colonialism is a total project. (Drabinski, 2019) Colonialism affects all aspects of human identity, sparing no part of a black person's identity. Highlighting the use of pidgin, a hybrid language employed by colonizers to communicate with the colonized, Fanon shows how language reinforces the latter's perceived inferiority. He *questions* the necessity of seeking validation from colonizers, emphasizing how such linguistic practices serve as a constant reminder of the colonized people's subordinate status. Speaking a language means expressing a world, and when the colonized adopt the language of the colonizer, they are, in essence, telling the world of their oppressor. As Fanon writes, every dialect is a way of thinking. And soon enough, the black man adopts French and profusely refuses to speak Creole.

Fanon points out the origin of the personality change and the source of this new way of being among the Antilles. He says, '*And the fact that the newly returned Negro adopts a language different from that of the group into which he was born is evidence of a dislocation, a separation.*' (Fanon, 1952/1986; p. 14) And regardless of the perfection a black person may achieve in speaking French, he remains a black person. To the white man, it always comes as a surprise; it is something unique and absurdly new to witness a black person speaking French with perfect diction. This element of surprise is nothing more than a reminder of inferiority for the black person who, regardless of his perfection in his diction, cannot escape 'the epidermal skin'.

In the following two chapters, written in juxtaposition, Fanon deals with inter-racial sexuality. First, he deals with the relations of a woman of color and a European and showcases how the embedded feeling of inferiority plays a role in defining desires and relationships. He begins with a critique of *Mayotte Capécia's novel I Am a Martinican Woman* (1948), where the author expresses her desire to be with a white man, which

is a typical case of a black woman's psyche. However, she soon realizes that there is no way she can negrify the world or, as a matter of fact, her own partner, and so what she does instead is to bleach her own mind and own body. Fanon vehemently criticizes *the work of Abdoulaye Sadji in Nini* in a similar vein, showcasing how hate is not inborn but demands existence. Discrimination is not solely limited to white Europeans; Black individuals may also experience a sense of inherent inferiority within their communities.

A sense of alienation emerges in the black man. As Fanon writes, *'In the man of color there is a constant effort to run away from his individuality, to annihilate his presence. Whenever a man of color protests, there is alienation. Whenever a man of color rebukes, there is alienation'.* To understand the relationship between a man of color and a white woman, Fanon begins by analyzing the autobiographical work by *René Maran, 'A Man Like Any Other'.* The problem is laid out in the character of Jean Veneuse, the protagonist, who is in love with a white woman, but no solution seems possible because, despite his intellect, he remains a negro. When Andrée Marielle writes to him that she loves him, Veneuse is not convinced. He needs the authorization of a white man to tell him, "Take my sister." (Fanon, 1952/1986; p. 49). The white man agrees to give his sister only on one condition: that you (Veneuse) are not a negro but extremely brown. Similar is the experience of students of color in France, who are told that they are not genuine Negroes. After all, Negroes are savage people, far away from civilization.

Interestingly, in a detailed footnote, Fanon also points out how a white man allows himself the luxury of sleeping with many women. This is true in every country, especially in the case of colonies. On the contrary, a certain sense of romance is associated when a white woman accepts a black man. After all, it's a giving, not *seizing.* The case in colonies is even more disturbing as it is no surprise, rather obvious that a soldier of the conquering army would go to bed with a young Malagasy girl, and there would be no tendency on the part of this white male to respect the young girl as an entity in herself and treat her like a person. And thus, Fanon pleads to the reader, the black person, to not feed the alienated psyche and give in to this quest for white flesh, for the sake of a sense of attainment. What is needed is *a restructuring of the world,* one where color is not regarded as a flaw.

Thereafter, Fanon begins with an important task that is the essence of his work, if one may say, the psychological accounts of the black colonized person. For this purpose, he analyses the work of *Octave Mannoni,* published in the book *Prospero and Caliban: Psychology of Colonized,* and draws a systematic critique of this work. Through Manoni's work, Fanon shows how the problem of colonialism is not limited to the interrelations of objective historical conditions but also is about the human attitudes towards these conditions. However, Fanon disagrees with Manoni's argument that the feeling of inferiority was latent in the black man from childhood. For Fanon, the inferiority complex is not something that antedates colonization.

A given society is racist or it is not. (Fanon, 1952/1986; p. 63) It is utopian to try to ascertain in what ways one kind of inhuman behavior differs from another kind of inhuman behavior. As well, Fanon argues in some detail against the capacity of European psychoanalysis to understand the colonial situation. Blackness requires modifications in method, especially if that method is to open space for resistance, rebellion, and liberation. (Drabinski, 2019) Fanon disagrees with M. Mannoni's claim that *"Colonial exploitation is not the same as other forms of exploitation, and colonial racialism is different from other kinds of racialism. . . .".* Instead, Fanon emphasizes that all forms of exploitation share fundamental similarities. He asserts, *"All forms of exploitation are identical because all of them are applied against the same 'object': man. When one tries to examine the structure of this or that form of exploitation from an abstract point of view, one simply turns one's back on the major, basic problem, which is that of restoring man to his proper place. Colonial racism is no different from any other racism."* (Fanon, 1952/1986; p. 65) Contrary to Mannoni's views, it is not the individual's childhood that is responsible for colonial racism but rather European civilization and its prominent representatives. This, in turn, fosters a sense of inferiority among Black individuals. A colonial, even if he is the one to be in the minority, does not feel that this makes him inferior. It is thus clear that the feeling of inferiority of the colonized is correlative to the European's feeling of superiority. Fanon states this quite clearly in his words: *'It is the racist who creates his inferior.'*

Re-reading Black Skin, White Masks through Skinner

When Skinner's method is used, Fanon's illocutionary intentions become immediately clear. Fanon aims to *analyze* and then *critique* the psychological effects of colonialism on both the colonized and the colonizer. To unravel the complexities of black identity, Fanon uses *psychoanalysis* as a tool in his groundbreaking work, 'The Black Skin, White Masks'. Owing to various myths constructed by a white man about the black man, Fanon argues, it is not always possible to capture the lived experiences of a black person. The aim, for Fanon, is to expose the *psychological impacts* endured by the Black person as a result of colonialism.

Here, one must point out the *historical and intellectual context* of Fanon's work, without which, Skinner would argue, it's not possible to understand the full meaning of any text. Fanon was engaging with the *anti-colonial struggles* of his century and tried to provide a personalized account of the lived experiences of the colonized Blacks. The dynamics of the colonial era and the French rule in the Caribbean lay bare in his book. Drawing from *the psychoanalytic theory* of Freud *and being influenced by the existentialism* of Sartre (especially the concept of 'gaze'), the intellectual context of Fanon's work is visible. The intellectual context is also visible in the *dialogues* Fanon enters with the other thinkers, be it Octave Mannoni or Alfred Adler. Skinner's method of textual analysis here would allow one to see Fanon's efforts to disrupt the dominant colonial discourses and appreciate how his writing functions as an act of resistance.

Perhaps this is visible in one of the most important chapters of the book, the fifth chapter, titled *The Fact of Blackness*. The opening of the chapter is from an exclamatory statement, *"Look, a Negro!"* which was made by a white child on Fanon while he was traveling in a train. This statement is a stark reminder of Fanon's blackness and of how he is simply an object among other objects. As long as a black man is among his own, Fanon writes, he will have no occasion, except in minor internal conflicts, to experience his being through others. He is unaware at what moment his inferiority comes into being through the other. Indeed, there was a little gulf between almost white, the mulatto, and the nigger, but it is only when the occasion arises when a black man meets the eyes of a white man that he encounters difficulties with his bodily schema.

Fanon uses the *existential-phenomenological* method to decode how racial essentialism manifests itself in the real (white) world. Returning to the same anecdote, 'Look, a Negro!', he points out how 'racism is integral to the declaration itself rather than being an addition to it: to say "Negro" is to say an anti-Black slur.' (Drabinski, 2019) He enriches his account by exploring the structures of a racist world that is anti-Black. To analyze this, he brings up Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of gaze and how the said 'gaze' creates a fixed identity of the other. This fixed identity of Blackness, constructed by the White gaze, confines the Black person and his blackness into a rigid structure and reduces it to an epidermal trait, or more commonly, a slur. Fanon visits the work of *Jean-Paul Sartre*, i.e., *Anti-Semite and Jew,* where he notes the inadequacy of understanding the phenomenon of anti-blackness as an equivalent to anti-semitism. Jews are slaves to the 'idea' others have of them, but a black person is a slave because of his appearance. An anti-Semite fears the Jew because of his capabilities and power, but an anti-Black racist abhors the Black person for his incapacity and weakness. It is not only the feeling of inferiority a black man suffers; it is a feeling of non-existence. Thus, Fanon notes that Jean-Paul Sartre has forgotten that the black person suffers in his own body quite differently from a white man.

Fanon also highlights the constant reminders of racial otherness from those around him. He observes, *"When people like me, they tell me it is in spite of my color. When they dislike me, they point out that it is not because of my color. Either way, I am locked into the infernal circle."* Seeking solace, he turns to his fellow Black individuals, his brothers. However, to his dismay, as Fanon writes, *"To my horror, they too reject me. They are almost white. And besides, they are about to marry white women. They will have children faintly tinged with brown."* (Fanon, 1952/1986; p. 88) This deepens his sense of alienation and rejection. Fanon reflects on his confrontation with something entirely unreasonable. He notes the psychoanalysts' claim that a child's most traumatizing experiences stem from encounters with rationality. However, he asserts that for a man who relies solely on reason, there is nothing more unsettling or destabilizing than the encounter with unreason. He also brings up the subtleties in which racism is reflected within society, including the

internalization of the black people subjugated under the long colonial rule. And thus, he finds a solution—however imperfect—in Negritude.

As Skinner would ask us to note, Fanon's *rhetorical style is an intentional act*. He uses a blend of personal and poetic to engage his reader. The use of various personal anecdotes pulls the reader into the book. The use of juxtaposition in chapters 2 and 3 of Fanon's book, coupled with the use of irony, fully equips the reader while exposing the hypocrisy of the white world.

To understand the experience of Black people, Fanon first tries to analyze the relevance of psychoanalytic schools and their various concepts. He shows how the experience of a black person is strikingly dissimilar from the experience of a white person. Fanon shows how a normal negro child, having grown up within a normal family, will become abnormal in the slightest contact with the white world. Therefore, it is neither logical nor useful to apply the theories constructed by white people. Here, he focuses on how various theories formulated by whites cannot serve the purpose of explaining the experience of a black person. He is critical of the idea that all phobias are caused by some or another form of childhood trauma. All phobias are not necessarily a result of some traumatic event; some are simply racist as is the case of negrophobia. But he agrees with one aspect of the psychoanalytic theory, i.e., all phobias have a sexual component in them, and considers it true in the case of racism. Affirming the presence of the collective unconscious among black people, Fanon hopes that the black person heals through collective catharsis. Therefore, he asserts the way for the black person to heal from this wound is to undergo a 'collective catharsis'. He argues that in every society, in every collectivity, there exists—must exist—a channel, an outlet through which the forces accumulated in the form of aggression can be released.

Fanon analyses the work of a psychoanalyst, *Alfred Adler*, who, although speaking about Black people, does not touch upon racism. Also, Adler's work helps at an individual level but does not work for the whole society. Fanon still tries to apply Adler's analyses on the Antilleans and concludes that *'The Negro is comparison. There is the first truth. He is a comparison; that is, he is constantly preoccupied with self-evaluation and ego-ideal. Whenever he comes into contact with someone else, the question of value, of merit, arises. The Antilleans have no inherent values of their own; they are always contingent on the presence of The Other.'* (Fanon, 1952/1986; p. 163) Fanon also looks at the idea of self-consciousness in G.W.F. Hegel's philosophy. He brings into view the idea of recognition and critically reads it. Fanon asserts that when this recognition is resisted, it undergoes an experience of *desire*, but as soon as a Black person desires, he is asking to be considered. As Drabinski writes, this is one of the most enigmatic ideas in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Fanon is deeply critical of dialectical thinking while at the same time drawing deep, important lessons from it. In particular, Fanon is concerned with how dialectics of recognition *might* simply mean the elevation of the Black person to a sense of humanity created by and modeled on white people. (Drabinski, 2019) And therefore, Fanon rejects the idea of recognition as it is rooted in colonial standards. Fanon also asserts that the hierarchy of a slave and master continues today. Calling the whole of the Antilles a "neurotic society," he holds colonialism responsible for it.

In the closing chapter, Fanon is, however, quite clear and straightforward. He is aware that the colonial experiences will vary from one colony to another. He appeals that every colony must speak its story out of serious study, not from an impulse. Fanon does not believe that appeals to reason or respect for human dignity will bring any change and alter reality. Gentle ways and shaking hands will not help the colonized get away from the psychological damage of colonialism. Sometimes aggressive ways and conflicts are very much necessary. As a final appeal, he appeals to the Black people to look forward and change their future. He reminds the black person that he is not and should not be the slave of the past, and when that happens, any future becomes a possibility. Concluding with a powerful prayer, Fanon writes, *"O my body, always make me a man who questions!"* Fanon embraces subjectivity and interrogation and believes it to be the solution to racial entrapment. It is the way through which white people trapped in whiteness and black people trapped in blackness can break through and escape. After all, it is only a man who questions that has broken the trap.

One should note that his closing prayer is a call for action, which, as Skinner would show us, is an intentional act of the author.

Using Skinner's method of textual interpretation is particularly helpful in acknowledging the different themes that inform Fanon's work. One theme that can be identified is that of alienation. Identity is another theme that runs through the book. Black Skin, White Masks shows how colonialism has alienated Black individuals from their own culture, resulting in fractured identities. A black person can neither whiten himself nor remain a Negro. The psychological framework that assigns Black people's inferiority as a derivative of childhood trauma is not only challenged but strongly critiqued by Fanon. This theme, in particular, allows one to see how the behaviors of Black people are a result of the systemic violence of colonialism. One theme that is particularly interesting is that of liberation. Fanon is constantly questioning and is very straightforward in his conclusion that liberation can only be achieved through an act of questioning.

Recovering Fanon's Intervention in Postcolonial International Relations

Among the three approaches—postcolonial approach, decolonial approach, and historical sociology approach—to study international relations, this paper locates Frantz Fanon and his work *Black Skin, White Masks* in the postcolonial approach. To put it simply, this is because of two reasons. First, the theoretical framework of postcolonialism is visible in the texts written by Fanon. Secondly, the objectives of postcolonialism and Fanon's work are in a close alliance. This is evident in the fact that Fanon's work is considered to be an essential reading in postcolonial literature. The postcolonial approach in IR aims to gain a critical understanding of what constitutes 'International Relations' beyond its mainstream view. Not only does it challenge the traditional frameworks of IR, particularly those established by realism and liberalism, but it also moves beyond them. Born out of literary and social theory and the study of Third World literature, postcolonialism posits the notion of difference and resistance present in relations between the West and the Third World (Paolini, 1999). Within International Relations, Fanon's work is most appropriately situated within the postcolonial tradition, which seeks to challenge Eurocentric assumptions and recover perspectives marginalised within mainstream IR theory (Seth, 2013). It brings the focus to the historical realities of imperialism and colonialism while providing a critique of the Eurocentric assumptions that continue to shape the so-called global world today. Postcolonial scholars also often contend that colonialism is not merely a historical phenomenon but an ongoing force that continues to shape and impact nations in the present. Fanon's work challenges the mainstream understanding of International relations by bringing colonialism, race and identity together and creating a dialogue between these overlapping sites of analysis and contributing to post colonial effort to question the historical foundations of global inequality.

The term 'postcolonial' does not mean that the effects of colonialism have ended but rather that they persist and continue to shape the modern world. Postcolonialism is an interdisciplinary framework that explores various intersections—of race, gender, class, identity, culture, and history. In *Black Skin, White Masks,* Fanon critiques the long-standing effects of colonialism on both the colonizer and the colonized. He uses psychoanalysis to examine how colonial histories shape the psychological identity of black individuals and to understand the construction of "blackness." He explains the way in which colonialism manages to embed feelings of inadequacy and inferiority in the minds of Black people, which in turn affects their sense of self. Through this celebrated book, *The Black Skin White Masks*, Fanon states that the feeling of inferiority of the colonized is correlative to the European's feeling of superiority... and that 'it is the racist that creates his inferiority' (Fanon, 1952/1986). Building on Fanon, Homi K. Bhabha developed ideas like 'hybridity', 'ambivalence', and the 'third space', emphasizing how colonized people navigate their identities between the cultures of colonizer and colonized (Bhabha, 1994). Race is an important and key variable, visible in the works of various postcolonial scholars. It is not possible to understand postcolonialism while missing Fanon's work. Throughout his book, Fanon focuses on the question of identity, critiques the idea of recognition, and deals with the black person's constant efforts to whiten themselves, assimilating in a white man's culture. Postcolonial theory looks critically at the lived experiences of the people of colonies and finds the legacy of

domination continuing to date. Fanon does the same with his book. Through personal anecdotes, he showcases to the reader the racial hierarchies present among the Antilleans.

In postcolonial discourse, as mentioned earlier, resistance, identity, race, culture, and assimilation are key themes, and each one of them is visible in Fanon's work. The reason this paper does not situate *Black Skin, White Masks* within the decolonial approach is because it focuses majorly on epistemic reconstitution. Decoloniality as an approach to studying international relations aims to confront the various structures of coloniality—especially the coloniality of power and the coloniality of knowledge—that continue to shape the world of the 21st century. However, it cannot be denied that both the postcolonial and decolonial approaches have various overlapping concerns, and, if need be, threads of similarities can be found in Fanon's work as well. Despite this, Fanon's work is majorly focused on the existential struggles of the Black and provides psychological insight into the 'Blackness', which is also central to postcolonial thought. Similarly, it does not locate Fanon's work in the historical sociology approach for a simple reason. Historical sociology lacks the focus that Fanon so eloquently describes on subjectivity, cultural hybridity, and the lived experiences of identity, here on Black identity.

Conclusion

Re-reading Fanon's work through Skinner allows for a greater engagement with the subtlety of the text and unravels its complexities. A methodological interpretation of Fanon's book also demonstrates that his work should not be seen as a standalone account of the experience of one individual and his encounter with racial discrimination, but is also an act of resistance against the psychological and emotional consequences of colonialism and its effect on identity. As a result, this paper is able to fulfil one important purpose, which is to be able to locate the context and intentions of the author. An enriched understanding of Fanon's critique of racial hierarchy, creation of post-colonial identity, and the desperation to assimilate is gained when Skinner's contextualisation is utilised. Additionally, this paper is an attempt to contribute to the contemporary critical scholarship. Fanon's usage of existential phenomenology and psychoanalysis presents a framework to decode the lived realities of racism and the nuanced manner in which racial stereotypes shape day-to-day interaction. It brings forward the historical and intellectual context in which Black Skin, White Masks was written by Fanon and highlights the relevance of the text for understanding postcolonial thought. Most importantly, the paper concludes that a contextualist interpretation is necessary to interact and understand seminal texts as it highlights both the author's intention and the temporal specificity of a text while also contributing to the broader theoretical contributions and ongoing debates of the discipline.

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